



The National Endowment
for the Humanities
——— *presents* ———

**The 44th Jefferson Lecture
in the Humanities**

**Anna
Deavere Smith**

**“On the Road:
A Search for American Character”**

**Followed by a Q & A with Jeffrey Brown
of *PBS NewsHour*.**

—Nancy Crampton

ABOUT ANNA DEAVERE SMITH:

The Baltimore native is known for her television and movie roles in *The West Wing*, *Nurse Jackie*, *The American President*, and, most recently, *Black-ish*. She was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2012 by President Barack Obama. Smith has been most influential in pioneering the techniques of what is now popularly known as “verbatim theater”: the performance of testimony from interviews with real people to explore issues of race, community, and identity. In her Pulitzer Prize-nominated one-woman play *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, Smith took on the personas of twenty-nine individuals to portray the 1991 incident that divided the



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—Ralph Abuswing

Orthodox Jewish and black communities in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights. Similarly, Smith interviewed more than two hundred people affected by the Los Angeles riots, after the Rodney King verdict, in crafting her solo performance *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, about the city’s turmoil. In her current project, Smith is developing new theatrical material from interviews with people whose lives are affected by the “school-to-prison pipeline,” a term describing the systematic criminalization of minor infractions in schools that helps lead to tragically high rates of incarceration among minority youths. She has been a professor at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts since 2000, and she previously taught at Stanford, University of Southern California, and Carnegie Mellon University. She had a visiting professorship at the Yale School of Medicine which was the inspiration for her latest play “Let Me Down Easy” on the subject of healthcare. In her Jefferson Lecture, titled “On the Road: A Search for American Character,” Smith will discuss and perform excerpts from her ongoing documentary project, begun in the early 1980s, of transforming the words of ordinary people into dramatic monolog.



Juan Martinez

The 2015 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities

DATE: Monday, April 6, 2015

(Note, this is the Monday after Easter Sunday)

TIME: 7:30 p.m.

LOCATION: The John F. Kennedy Center
for the Performing Arts, Concert Hall
2700 F St, NW, Washington, DC 20566

Free shuttles run between the Foggy Bottom
Metro station (orange, blue, and silver lines)
and the Kennedy Center.

DESSERT AND OPEN BAR RECEPTION:

The Nations Gallery and Roof Terrace Level
immediately following the lecture

FREE TICKET REGISTRATION:

Available at www.neh.gov

WATCH LIVE online at www.neh.gov



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FOR EDUCATORS

EDSITEment Suggested Resources for Anna Deavere Smith

NEH's [EDSITEment](#) offers a few classroom-ready resources targeted to teachers who would like to introduce Anna Deavere Smith and her documentary techniques to their students. The suggestions below have been chosen with secondary school students (and above) in mind, although the dramatic exercise is easily scalable to the lower grades. Subject areas include theatre arts, film studies, literature, journalism, social studies, and history.

- Have students listen to the short interview, [Anna Deavere Smith's *Letters to a Young Artist*](#) (NPR, 2006), in which Ms. Deavere Smith discusses writers and poets who have influenced her. *Letters to a Young Artist: Straight-up Advice on Making a Life in the Arts* (Anchor, 2006) is accessible through [Google Books](#) and can be used to spark further classroom discussion.
- In addition, EDSITEment offers specific resources for several authors mentioned in the interview: Charles Baudelaire, [Poète Maudit \(The Cursed Poet\)](#); Lorraine Hansberry, [A Raisin in the Sun: The Quest for the American Dream](#); William Shakespeare, [various literature and language resources](#); Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, [Poems for a Democracy](#).
- If you are inspired to try out documentary theater techniques for yourself, consider [TheatreFolk's](#) downloadable classroom exercise, which also provides background on the technique and links to excerpts of documentary theater performances, such as Ms. Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*.
- Middle and high school students can readily apply much of what they have learned from Anna Deavere Smith and her innovative approach to their coursework by crafting performances based on historical characters. A useful guide to the principles behind a good historical performance has been developed by [National History Day](#). See also NEH's Google Hangout for National History Day on [How to Create a Historical Performance](#).

FOR MEDIA

Coverage of the lecture is open to media.
Pre-lecture media interviews are available.

Please contact Paula Wasley at (202) 606-8424
or pwasley@neh.gov

MULTIMEDIA CONTENT

WATCH Anna Deavere Smith and NEH
Chairman William Adams discuss the
Jefferson Lecture in a video at www.neh.gov

READ about Anna Deavere Smith in the
March/April issue of NEH's magazine
HUMANITIES

FOLLOW the conversation about the NEH
Jefferson Lecture on Twitter at [@NEHgov](https://twitter.com/NEHgov)
with the hashtag [#jefflec15](https://twitter.com/hashtag/jefflec15)

CONNECT with the [National Endowment](#)
[for the Humanities](#) on Facebook

FOLLOW Anna Deavere Smith on Twitter
leading up to and during the lecture at
[@AnnaDeavereS](https://twitter.com/AnnaDeavereS)



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—Tom Wolff

ABOUT CHAIRMAN WILLIAM D. ADAMS: The tenth chairman of NEH was previously president of Colby College in Waterville, Maine, from 2000 until his retirement on June 30, 2014. He is a committed advocate for liberal arts education and brings to the Endowment a long record of leadership in higher education and the humanities. A native of Birmingham, Michigan, and son of an auto industry executive, Adams earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy at Colorado College and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Santa Cruz History of Consciousness Program, although his formal education was interrupted by three years of service in the Army, including one year in Vietnam. It was partly that experience, he says, that motivated him to study and teach in the humanities. He studied in France as a Fulbright Scholar before beginning his career in higher education with appointments to teach political philosophy at Santa Clara University in California and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He went on to coordinate the Great Works in Western Culture program at Stanford University and to serve as vice president and secretary of Wesleyan University. He became president of Bucknell University in 1995 and president of Colby College in 2000.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES:

The National Endowment for the Humanities, an independent federal agency, supports research and learning in history, literature, philosophy, and other areas of the humanities by funding selected, peer-reviewed proposals from around the nation. Established by Congress in 1965, NEH celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

ABOUT THE JEFFERSON LECTURE:

Named after Thomas Jefferson, America's third president and a Founding Father who excelled in several academic disciplines, the annual Jefferson Lecture is the Endowment's most widely attended public event. The lecture is the highest honor in the humanities bestowed by the federal government. The event, which is free and open to the public, exemplifies the values in the agency's founding 1965 legislation, which noted that the "humanities belong to all the people of the United States." Past Jefferson Lecturers include bio-grapher Walter Isaacson (2014), filmmaker Martin Scorsese (2013), poet and novelist Wendell Berry (2012), historian Drew Gilpin Faust (2011), writer John Updike (2008), cultural scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2002), playwright Arthur Miller (2001), writer Toni Morrison (1996), historian Barbara Tuchman (1980), and poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren (1974). Past lectures have also been attended by a diverse and significant audience ranging from graduate students to Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden, Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, and Congressman John Lewis of Georgia's 5th district. The lectureship carries a \$10,000 honorarium, set by statute.